

Washington, DC – To ensure that the amount of benefits paid to Veterans keeps pace with cost increases caused by inflation, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) voted for the Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2008. The bill, which passed the House unanimously and has received Senate approval, raises the rates of Veterans' disability compensation, dependency and indemnity compensation for surviving spouses and children, as well as additional compensation for dependents. This increase would take effect on December 1, 2008, affecting 2.8 million Veterans and more than 300,000 surviving spouses nationwide by improving their benefits by the same percentage as the Social Security Cost-of-Living Adjustment, which the Congressional Budget Office projects will be 2.8 percent. —

“It is common sense to support this legislation, especially with the mounting costs of food, energy and many other basic needs” said Congressman Sestak. “We have a responsibility to make certain that the men and women who have worn the cloth of this nation – and their families – receive the assistance needed to provide for themselves and their loved ones. This measure is part of a larger effort of which I am proud to be a part, as this Congress has passed the largest ever increase in VA funding and has significantly increased the resources devoted to helping Veterans whose mental health has been affected by their service.”

Also today, Congressman Sestak voted for, and the House passed, the Rural Veterans Access to Care Act to allow Veterans living in rural areas to have the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) also cover health services they receive through a non-VA health care provider. Since supporting the record \$4.6 billion funding increase for fiscal year 2008, the Congressman has continued to work for better care for our Veterans. Last month he toured the VA hospital in Philadelphia to meet with the Director and discuss the assistance his staff needs to provide appropriate care, particularly for the increasing incidences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The Congressman also visited the Coatesville facility, where he announced that he is pursuing legislation to reverse income limits that have prevented certain categories of Veterans from qualifying for health benefits.

Furthermore, Congressman Sestak has voted for, and the House has recently passed, an appropriations bill that provides \$47.7 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs, a \$4.6 billion increase over fiscal year 2008. Of particular significance is the medical services funding, which focuses on two areas of growing concern: mental health and homelessness. This bill appropriates \$3.8 billion for specialty mental health care and \$584 million for substance abuse programs. To address homelessness, this act builds on the Homes for Heroes Act, which the Congressman supported to establish a supportive housing program at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for low-income veterans. The appropriations bill provides \$130 million for a homeless grants and per diem program, rejecting the President's \$8

million cut, and includes \$32 million to hire additional personnel for the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program.

According to the VA, its homeless assistance and treatment network reaches more than 100,000 veterans annually. However, this number represents only 25 percent of homeless Veterans, leaving 300,000 Veterans who must seek assistance from local government agencies and service organizations in their communities. To further address this serious problem, Congressman Sestak voted for, and the House and Senate passed, the Dignified Treatment of Wounded Warriors Act (HR 1538). This legislation would require the VA to carry out a demonstration program on preventing Veterans at-risk of homelessness from becoming homeless. Two million dollars would be appropriated through fiscal year 2011 for this program.

The Congressman also included two critical amendments to the bill to improve mental health care for wounded soldiers. The first highlights the fact that mental health care is an essential component to the medical services offered to our Veterans and the members of our Armed Services by clarifying that 'medical care' as defined in HR 1538 includes mental health care services. The second amendment requires the Secretary of the Department of Defense to develop a plan to help prevent Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other stress-related psychopathologies (including substance abuse conditions) from developing in our military service members. In addition, it requires the Secretary to submit to Congress within 180 days a plan for establishing a Peer-Reviewed research program within the Defense Health Program's research and development function to research the prevention of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and how to best strengthen the psychological resiliency of our military service members.

"These are two issues that are not going away," said Congressman Sestak. "Thousands of troops are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues, and more Veterans of the current wars are falling into homelessness faster than we have seen in any prior conflicts. It is imperative that we continue to devote as many resources as possible to combating these serious problems."

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security

Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the Congress.

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